

PHOTO OF THE DAY



Naomi Devil's works at the Műcsarnok museum's exhibition, "Spaces (ap)art"

UPCOMING EVENTS

Szijjártó meets Polish, counterpart Jacek Czaputowicz, Maltese counterpart Carmelo Abela in Budapest

Stats office prelim report on labour, unemployment in Nov 2018-Jan 2019

Forum of Hungarian MPs from Carpathian Basin working team meets

TOP STORY

SERBIA EU INTEGRATION SHARED INTEREST

Serbia's EU integration is in the interests of Hungary and the whole of Europe, and Hungary will continue to back Serbia in its aspirations to join the bloc, the Hungarian foreign minister said after talks with Serbia's European integration minister.

Péter Szijjártó told a joint press conference with Jadranka Joksimović after the meeting that enlargement was one of the key elements of the ongoing debate on the future of the EU, adding, however, that there was considerable opposition to expanding the bloc. Hungary's goal is for the EU to get stronger, and to do so, it needs new member states that can boost its security and economy, Szijjártó said. Szijjártó said the emergence of new migration waves and the chance that militants of the Islamic State terrorist group could return to the continent were the biggest threats to the security of the EU. Migration pressure was set to rise on the Western Balkan route, and argued that integrating the countries in that region into the EU and strengthening cooperation on border control would help boost the continent's security. Szijjártó said EU enlargement was slow, adding that it was unfair towards the candidate countries that the EU has no plans to add new members before 2025. Hungary and Serbia will hold a joint government meeting next month, the minister noted.

ORBÁN HOLDS TALKS WITH PATRIARCH OF MELKITE GREEK CATHOLIC CHURCH

Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Deputy Prime Minister Zsolt Semjén held talks with Youssef Absi, the patriarch of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, in the form of a luncheon in the Carmelite monastery in Budapest. The Melkite Greek Catholic Church is headquartered in the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Dormition in Damascus. Given the absence of direct diplomatic links between Hungary and Syria, the Hungarian government aims to assist the country's Christian communities via its Hungary Helps humanitarian programme, the PM's press chief cited the Hungarian leaders as saying. Orbán said his government has reviewed the aid proposals sent by local church leaders and has begun delivering the necessary supplies to the communities in need. Between autumn 2016 and January 2019, Hungary set aside a total of 7.63 billion forints (EUR 24m) to help keep persecuted Christian communities in their homelands. The government's policy remains unchanged: help should be provided at the point where it is needed rather than "bringing trouble over to Europe."

KOVÁCS: BRUSSELS MAKES CONFESSION

Brussels has in effect made a confession that its concepts of migration that the Hungarian government claims would

increase migration to Europe do indeed exist, Zoltán Kovács, the state secretary for international communications and relations, said. "The government regards these as dangerous," Kovács told a press conference, commenting on the European Commission's critical response to the government's campaign on migration. A legal proposal on the compulsory distribution of migrants within the bloc does exist and the European Commission has also confirmed that it is still pushing for the settlement of migrants from outside the EU within this framework, he said. The commission has admitted that migrants staying in Greece receive bank cards, so far costing 110 million euros, he said. It has also "confessed" to a desire to strengthen border guard units controlled from Brussels, Kovács added, noting a comment by German Chancellor Angela Merkel that this could only work at the expense of national sovereignty. "Also confessed is the European Parliament's adoption of a proposal on migrant visas, the so-called humanitarian visas, and this essentially paves the way for the commission to stand by it," he said. Meanwhile, whereas the commission has not been mentioned in the EC resolution, the EP is intent on increasing funding for NGOs by 570 billion in the next financial cycle, Kovács said.

He said the Hungarian government was determined to inform the public about Brussels' plans, and this is why Prime Minister Viktor Orbán is sending a letter to all voters. The

government "won't be dissuaded from communicating plans that it disagrees with," he said. "We don't want Hungary to be a country of immigrants while the Brussels bureaucracy is intent on Europe becoming a continent of immigrants." Kovács argued that the commission's job should be to enforce what the European Council decides rather than implementing migration plans in its preparatory work without a consensus.

DK PROGRAMME CALLS FOR EUROPEAN FAMILY ALLOWANCE, MINIMUM WAGE

The Democratic Coalition (DK) calls for the introduction of a European family allowance and minimum wage in its programme for the upcoming EP election, the leftist party said. Speaking to a press conference, the party's top candidate, Klára Dobrev, said that all European children would be eligible for the European family allowance next to their member state's own family support. The European minimum wage and minimum pension would supplement the member state's, should it be "incapable or unwilling" to ensure its citizens a decent income, Dobrev said. "In Hungary, over a quarter of families currently live under the poverty threshold," she added. DK stands for a strong, united Europe and embraces building a united states of Europe, Dobrev said. Such an alliance would view its citizens as members of a community and not merely as consumers, taxpayers or employees, she said.

Ruling Fidesz said in response that DK is one of the most vocal supporters of pro-migration policies in Hungary. He added that Dobrev, the wife of DK leader Ferenc Gyurcsány, was also involved in the case of Csaba Czeglédi, who had been charged with defrauding the government of 6 billion forints (EUR 18.9m). Czeglédi has worked as a lawyer for Gyurcsány's "family company", Altus, Hidvéghi said, adding that it seems Dobrev "would be keen to get the immunity that comes with being an MEP".

HEGEDŰS QUILTS JOBBIK

MP Enikő Hegedűs said that she has left the opposition Jobbik party along with its parliamentary group, and will continue in parliament as an independent. "Any form of solidarity with post-communists completely goes against my upbringing and my personal beliefs," Hegedűs said in an email to MTI. Hegedűs was elected to a third consecutive parliamentary term from the nationalist party's list in last April's general election. "In light of the now irreconcilable differences on political strategy, I am announcing to the Speaker of Parliament my exit from Jobbik's parliamentary group," Hegedűs wrote. "Further, I am announcing the resignation of my party membership, and in turn, all my party functions, to the board of Jobbik." Hegedűs is the fifth member to quit Jobbik's parliamentary group since the election. In May, Jobbik's leadership expelled Dóra Dúró,

while János Volner was kicked out in October. As a show of solidarity with Volner, István Apáti and Erik Fülöp quit the party voluntarily after his firing. The four lawmakers formed a block for Jobbik splinter group Mi Hazánk in parliament in November.

SOCIALIST MEP SENDS LEAFLETS TO EPP MEPS

Socialist MEP István Ujhelyi sent to all members of the European People's Party (EPP) a two-page leaflet criticising the Hungarian government's campaign and Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's policy. Ujhelyi said that the leaflet presents the government's "deceptive Juncker-Soros ad hoardings campaign" on the one side. On the other, it reminds members of Fidesz's party family that "in Viktor Orbán, they are harbouring a man in the party family who has crossed the red line the EPP has set multiple times", he said. "EPP group leader Manfred Weber has said countless times that Fidesz has crossed the line. Still, the EPP continues to look the other way...", Ujhelyi said. Fidesz's latest billboard campaign, which portrays the EU leadership as "pro-migration conspirators", is an attack on its own party family, he said.

PARLT CTTEE ENDORSES MATOLCSY'S RENOMINATION AS CBANK GOVERNOR

Parliament's economic committee approved the renomination of György Matolcsy to head the National Bank

of Hungary (NBH) for a second term. The nomination was approved with 10 votes in favour and 5 against. Matolcsy told the session that over the past six years he had been successful in fulfilling the requirements of his mandate and had contributed to Hungary's "exceptional growth turnaround". All of Hungary's micro and macroeconomic indicators show a favourable situation, he said. The central bank's interest policy has saved the state budget 2,400 billion forints (EUR 7.5bn) in interest payments, Matolcsy said. The prime minister's press chief had said on Feb. 12 that Viktor Orbán would nominate Matolcsy for another term as NBH governor. Matolcsy's six-year mandate as NBH governor ends on March 3, 2019. There is a two-term limit for NBH governor.

PARLT CTTEE MEETING ON OPPOSITION DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES LACKS QUORUM

Parliament's immunity committee meeting convened to discuss disciplinary procedures against 38 opposition lawmakers lacked quorum because opposition party representatives voted against approving the body's agenda.

The disciplinary procedures were launched against the MPs in connection with a parliamentary vote on stricter labour code rules on December 12. The legislation raises the upper threshold for annual overtime from 250 to 400 hours. Opposition

lawmakers blocked the house speaker's dais and obstructed proceedings with loud whistling and jeering in an attempt to thwart the vote.

Opposition members of the committee called for an open session to be held. But the committee's head indicated that house rules only allow a disciplinary procedure to be addressed at a session held behind closed doors. János Hargitai told reporters that the committee voted against holding an open session, as well as against amending the house rules. As opposition members afterwards did not vote to approve the committee's agenda, the meeting could not take place, he said.

THOUSANDS TO JOIN PUBLIC WORKERS' UNION STRIKE

Several thousand public employees have told their union of their intention to join a national strike on March 14, Erzsébet Boros, the head of the MKKSZ union, said. The strike was called in January in protest against the recently amended labour code which sets stricter overtime rules. The Trade Union of Hungarian Civil Servants and Public Employees is also demanding higher and better working conditions. Boros told a press conference that her union planned the strike in support of the demands of local government and public administration employees alone. However, if talks between social workers and government fail, it will join a strike of the union of social

workers (SZAD). Public administration employees can only go on strike lawfully if a union operates and with the support of at least half of the employees, she noted.

Boros said she had sent letters to Gergely Gulyás, head of the Prime Minister's Office, Interior Minister Sándor Pintér and a joint letter with the head of SZAD to Attila Fülöp, the state secretary for social affairs, informing them that the conditions to hold a strike have been met. They have also requested talks on their demands, but so far only the Human Resources Ministry has responded, scheduling a meeting with union representatives for March 6. Among their demands, MKKSZ is calling for the basic minimum wage to be the starting point for all public service wage systems, while workers with vocational training backgrounds should be paid the minimum wage for skilled workers. A new minimum wage for jobs that require higher education qualifications should also be introduced, the union says. They are also calling for the reinstatement of a basic holiday leave entitlement, a uniform allowance system, flexible working hours, as well as the reinstatement of July 1 as a public holiday.

NBH POLICY MAKERS KEEP BASE RATE ON HOLD

The National Bank of Hungary's Monetary Council decided to keep the central bank's key rate on hold at 0.90% at a monthly policy meeting. The

Council has left the base rate on hold since signalling an end to an easing cycle at a policy meeting in the spring of 2016. However, the rate-setters have made use of "unconventional, targeted" instruments to ease monetary policy further. After recent policy meetings, the Council has said it is "prepared for the gradual and cautious normalisation of monetary policy".

In its statement, the Council acknowledged the indicator had reached the 3.0% threshold and said it is "likely to rise above 3% in the coming months" but "then stay close to 3% over the monetary policy horizon". The Council said nearly the same thing after the January policy meeting, although then it saw the measure of core inflation excluding indirect tax effects rising over 3% "in early 2019". The rate-setters said sentiment on global financial markets had been "more favourable" since the previous monthly policy meeting, but noted a "weakening outlook" for global growth and particularly growth in the euro zone. After the policy meeting on Tuesday, the overnight deposit rate and the overnight collateralised rate were unchanged at -0.15% and 0.90%, respectively.

HUNGARY'S POPULATION SHRINKS BY 41,300 IN 2018 - KSH

The population of Hungary declined by 41,300 in 2018 as a net result of 89,800 live births and 131,100 deaths during the year, the Central Statistical

Office (KSH) said. Hungary's population fell by 40,097 a year before, when there were 91,577 live births and 131,674 deaths. KSH noted that the estimated total fertility rate was 1.49, the same as in 2017. Thus, the willingness to have children remained unchanged and the number of live births fell due to the decline in the number of women of child-bearing age. The estimated total population of the country including the net effects of migration was at 9,764,000 at the end of the year. There were 50,900 marriage ceremonies in Hungary in 2018, up by 0.6%, or 328, compared with 2017.

GOVT TAKES ACTION AGAINST TAX EVASION BY MULTATIONALS

The government plans to institute new rules with a view to preventing multinational companies from evading

Hungarian taxes, a finance ministry official told the daily Magyar Nemzet. State secretary for tax affairs Norbert Izer said the new rules would largely follow European Union provisions, but Hungarian tax experts also will be consulted at a meeting in March held as part of the drafting process. Hungary, he said, was among the best investment destinations, one of the reasons being the 2011 overhaul of the tax system which introduced the 9% corporate tax, now the lowest in the EU. Being investor-friendly, however, does not mean tolerating certain companies withdrawing themselves from their tax obligations, he added.

MOST HUNGARIANS SEE TIPPING DOCTORS AFTER TREATMENT AS A CRIME

A majority of Hungarians disapprove of tipping doctors after treatment

and want the practice to be classed as a crime, according to Hungarian Academy of Sciences researchers. Few, however, are familiar with recent legislation that criminalises the acceptance of a gratuity payment in advance, according to the survey conducted by the academy's Centre for Social Sciences. Fully 56% of respondents said paying gratuities after treatment should be punished, the survey of 1,200 people carried out last October found. Only 34% knew that accepting a gratuity in advance is a crime, the academy said in a statement on Tuesday. Over 70% knew that doctors who accept a tip after treatment do not commit a crime. But only 49% were aware that a doctor asking for a fee from a patient entitled to state health-care services free of charge is a crime under Hungarian law.